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WASHINGTON — The archivists at Hyde Park have finally decided that enough time has elapsed since Watergate to share with their taxpayer employers the news that Franklin D. Roosevelt pioneered in the sleazy business of secretly recording conversations in the President's office.

F.D.R. apologist Arthur Schlesinger Jr. hastily assures us that the eavesdropping device installed by his idol was merely "to protect F.D.R. from being misquoted during the 1940 campaign," presumably by his lapdog press corps, and that hours of conversations with political leaders were recorded "through accident or inadvertence."

Inadvertence, my eye; Roosevelt delighted in secret snooping, again and again and again:

- The late William Sullivan of the F.B.I., who supervised the tapping of my own telephone in 1969, confided to me in 1973 that the surveillance ordered by F.D.R. of War Production Board chief Donald Nelson was far more intimate and extensive, and centered on his amorous interests — which President Roosevelt found fascinating.

- Gen. William Donovan, head of the agency that was the predecessor of the C.I.A., warned his intelligence colleagues in 1942, one of them informs me, to be guarded in their talk while in the President's office because conversations there were "taken down" (either by recording, or by a Signal Corps stenographer hidden in the room underneath).

- Alice Roosevelt Longworth told a famous contemporary (still alive and alert) that she and "cousin Franklin," then Assistant Secretary of the Navy, had placed what he called a "bug" in a lamp next to a sofa used by Bernard Baruch, at a time when Mr. Baruch was having an affair with a woman in the May-Adams Hotel in Washington.

According to the gossipy Mrs. L., who adored F.D.R., cousin Franklin had wanted to plant the bug under Mr. Baruch's bed, but cousin Alice explained that "Bernie's amour was a lady, and no

ESSAY

F.D.R.'s Dirty Tricks

By William Safire.

lady discusses politics in bed"; the sofa was the place for that. Later, Mr. Baruch told my source that he was always bitter toward F.D.R. because of a "mean trick" pulled while F.D.R. was at the Navy Department.

- Sam Pryor, now 84, who packed the galleries for Wendell Willkie at the 1940 Republican Convention, insists that F.D.R. operative Ed Flynn bugged Republican campaign offices and says "what F.D.R. did to Willkie made Watergate look like a tea party."

Until now, such charges could be waved aside as pitiful precedent-seeking by Nixonians out to ameliorate their man's crimes by arguing "everybody did it." But now comes F.D.R.'s voice, covered up these 40 years, ordering a political aide to besmear Wendell Willkie — whose real sin was to dare challenge F.D.R.'s right to a third term — with rumors of an affair with a lady in New York, assumed to be book review editor Irita Van Doren.

"Spread it as a word-of-mouth thing," directed the President of the United States. (In some transcripts, that dismaying command appears as "[We can] spread it," as if historians are loath to let the guilty quotation stand without some tiny extenuation.) "We can't have any of our principal speakers refer to it," said

F.D.R., "but the people down the line can get it out." Donald Segretti had not yet been born.

F.D.R. went on to explain in detail how the salacious rumor should be planted, making the point that the candidate's wife had been "hired" to campaign with him.

Consider the depth of the moral hypocrisy: here was a man whose own marriage was a lie; whose lifelong relationship with Lucy Rutherford Mercer, in whose arms he died, probably drove his wife into her intimate involvement with Lorena Hickok; here was F.D.R. directing his political hatchetmen "way, way down the line" to besmear his political opponent with rumors of infidelity.

Here was a politician — keeping Eleanor Roosevelt by his political side, posing falsely as a loving helpmeet, by sending her on political trips and diplomatic missions at taxpayers' expense — telling his Government-paid rumor-monger to see to it that the opposing candidate was accused of "hiring" his wife to appear at his side.

F.D.R. had his greatnesses, too; why should anyone who hated to wallow in Watergate now want to frolic in Frankingate? F.D.R.'s dirty-tricks do not subtract one iota from Richard Nixon's misdeeds. "Everybody did it" is no excuse, and is not even true — Harry Truman removed F.D.R.'s secret recorder in 1945.

Ah, but it's strangely satisfying to see the newspapers uniformly devote the lower right-hand corner of their front pages to this story, and the network documentaries already in the can for the Roosevelt centennial forced to open the glorifications to insert this discordant asterisk. And to watch the painful smile of my friend Arthur as he dismisses as "inadvertent" the activation of a surreptitious recorder, and as insignificant as an historic revelation this partial destruction of the legend he has so lovingly tended.